



Sami Al Malood playing oud



Sami playing reed instrument

# IMMERSED IN CULTURE

**As an expat learning firsthand about musical culture from a Bedouin, Mary Coons discovers the talents and passion of a multitasking Bahraini artist**

**S**ami Al Malood, a retired, multi-talented Bahraini musician, is a guardian of cultural traditions – a painter, weaver, potter and all-around craftsman – Bedouin traditions that define a people. His people.

Sami greets my husband and I with an accommodating smile as he ushers us into an open-air space crammed with works of his trade.

He made the mat from the palm fronds forming a side wall, wove the food baskets that sit upon the triangular-shaped piece of wood bound together with rope, fashioned the clay water container with its rustic wooden cover and cured the goat skin that is used as the traditional method of making laban.

Sami has a stall at the Al Jasra Handicrafts Centre in Bahrain where he demonstrates his unique talents to tourists and visitors. While visiting him, he presented each of us with an oyster-shell key chain he makes and then painted our respective names in Arabic on them.

Of pearls, he explained that sand naturally seeps into the oyster shell causing it to ooze fluid to coat the sand and protect the oyster. The fluid hardens and forms the pearl (lulu). Different oysters seep different fluids, which gives colours to the pearls: near pure white,

yellow, gold or black. In Bahrain it is illegal to sell cultured pearls, so as to preserve the authentic heritage of the real pearl.

## **Making Laban the Old-Fashioned Way**

Laban was once exclusively made from goat's milk. As the story goes, the process involves pouring the milk into a softened goatskin that is then suspended on a wooden tripod. The skin is rocked back and forth for about 30 minutes before being poured into a large pot, according to Sami. When the yogurt has separated, butter floats to the top. What is left at the bottom is laban – similar to buttermilk.

First, however, the dried goatskin must be softened. Sami soaked the skin in a bowl of water for a minute or so before removing it. He then began to steadily blow air into the skin from his mouth. Once filled, it was ready for the goat's milk.

The skin is closed at the bottom with a thick leather strip stitched shut. The top is left open and a handle of braided leather attached to it. Also attached is a long length of waxed cord that is used to suspend the bag from the tripod or tree branch, to rock the bag back and forth during the churning process. The bag can also be used to store and carry water or camel or goat milk.



Sami Al Malood band



Arab version of clarinet

Today most Arabs purchase laban ready-made from the grocery store; however, those wishing to make it, most often do so with a laban-maker, an aluminum container that mimics the Bedouin process.

### Sami the Musician

Having formed the Sami Al Malood Traditional Band more than 35 years ago, he is constantly in demand to perform for cultural events, as well as at Manama Souq.

Sami skilfully plays a clarinet-type wood instrument, drums, the oud, bagpipes and a type of recorder that looks like a flute but is held differently. He demonstrated all of them for us. And, yes, this craftsman extraordinaire makes all of his instruments.

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Sami's homemade drums

- **Clarinet** – high-quality workmanship is obvious in this instrument. Sami likened it to a screechy horn, explaining that each one is different. He produced a chunk of wood that was beginning to take form as the horn's end piece.

- **Drums** – the three-piece drum set is commonly seen and used in concerts. There are various sizes, each with its own tenor. The goblet- or chalice-shaped drum, known as a darabukah, is used mostly in the Middle East and North Africa.

Sami stretches cow skin over the top of his drums. The instruments he makes and plays with his band are 'struck' drums; the sound is produced by hitting the skin with the hand. The stretched skin vibrates and produces the sound which he gladly demonstrated.

- **Bagpipes** – known in Arabic as jirba, which means droneless, single-reed, double-chartered (two pipes) bagpipe. Drone refers to the harmonic effect where a note or chord is repetitiously played throughout most or all of a piece. The chanter is the part of the bagpipe upon which the musician creates the melody.

Sami picked up the softened bagpipe, which is literally the skin of a goat, and blew air in via one of the forelegs as it began to take on the form of a bagpipe. The horn mouthpiece is inserted into another foreleg. Both rear legs sealed off with skin. The bagpipes are personalised with Arabic writing. Sami wrote Bahrain in henna ink on his along with a red painted heart.

- **Open-ended flute** – the small reed instrument Sami carves is made of wood with a bamboo mouthpiece and known by its Arabic name of Salamiyyah. He explained that he works a little at a time on these instruments, as it is a lengthy process. He makes variously sized



Air-filled skin



Sami's painting

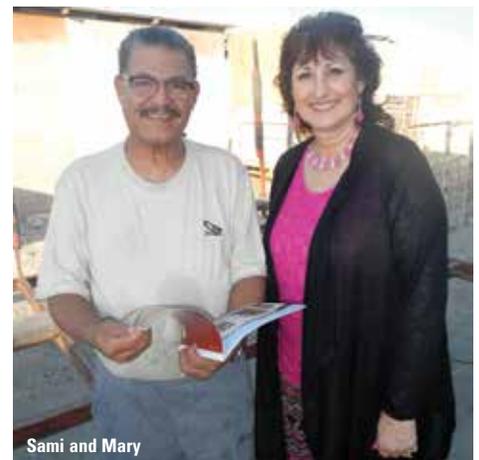
flutes, each with different holes that produce different sounds.

"I learned from the older people how to play the flute," he says. "When I play a particular song with my band, it is always a different tune. I never play it the exact same way the next time."

He has taught his son to make the instruments, thus ensuring that the skill will not die out with him. Sami also has taught the flute to schoolchildren and is currently teaching six or seven Gulf Arabs to play the instrument. "It is an art form that is going by the wayside unless the young learn to make and play it," he cautions.

It was an amazing cultural experience, which is what I relish: cultural immersion personally explained by a humble and gracious Bahraini Bedouin who truly wants to share his knowledge of the old ways.

My intercultural learning experience is one I'll never forget. I credit Sami with connecting this open-minded traveller to his time-honoured traditions.



Sami and Mary